

**Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: A Protestant View of the Cosmic**

**Drama**, Jerry L. Walls, Brazos, 2015 (ISBN 978-1-58743-356-6),

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Jerry Walls is a philosopher of religion and philosophical theologian who previously published three academic monographs on the afterlife: *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (OUP, 2002), *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation* (OUP, 2012). The book under discussion proffers the central thoughts on these issues in more popular form (p. 16).

Walls, a protestant theologian, intends the book primarily for evangelical protestants (re-)considering their views of hell and purgatory. As this book contains a protestant plea for purgatory, it will be useful for Roman Catholic and Orthodox scholars, and ecumenical theologians in general, to look at its reasoning.

Walls' book is well written in a conversational style, anticipating the major problems his reasoning will have for his primary audience. Although this is not a heavy-handed book, it is clear throughout that it is based on serious academic scholarship. Scholars doubting whether Walls' three monographs are worth investigating, might well start with this little book.

Heaven is discussed in the first chapter, for heaven is the fundamental reality. Hell is best understood in the light of heaven. The same is true of purgatory. The chapter's title (*Heaven, Trinity*

*and the meaning of life*) points to a double approach. Heaven is necessary from a Trinitarian perspective, but it is also 'the fitting end to the entire human drama' (p. 24). Walls writes poignantly: 'If the Trinity is bedrock reality, then love is the very heart of the meaning of life. And when perfect love achieves its ends, we may hope to find the perfect happiness we crave, the perfect comic end of the cosmic drama' (p. 46).

The second chapter (*Consolation measures when the dream has died*) tackles the issue of what happens if we stop believing in heaven. Walls discusses several philosophers who have attempted to compensate for the loss of belief in heaven (Bertrand Russell, Richard Taylor, Thomas Nagel, Keith Parsons). This chapter has an apologetic feel to it. It is not so clear how this chapter functions in the whole of the book, how it furthers the understanding of the doctrine of the afterlife. Perhaps in making the case that it is logical, and the alternatives are not? It is also not clear why these and not other particular philosophers are discussed. Some more context and rationale would have been helpful.

The third chapter (*If God is love, why is there a hell?*) deals with the doctrine of hell. It is here that Walls' theological system comes clear. Walls is not a Calvinist, but an Arminian, protestant,. Thus for Walls, love cannot be coerced. 'It is because love is at the very heart of our freedom as creatures made in the image of God that some people may choose not to return the love of God' (p. 73). The following sentence sums it up beautifully: 'Because God is love,

the comic ending is assured, but because he is love, hell is also possible' (p. 68).

Chapter four (*If we are saved by grace, why do we need purgatory?*) offers a protestant theological rationale for purgatory. Walls makes a distinction between a satisfaction view of purgatory (exacting punishment to pay a debt of justice) and a sanctification view (moral and spiritual transformation). It is the latter view, according to Walls, that is amenable to Protestantism. Indeed, says Walls, every theological system needs purgatory, even if 'only' as a momentary experience sanctifying the departed instantly prior to their encounter with God. This chapter will undoubtedly be of most interest to his intended readership.

The fifth chapter (*Saving souls and/or bodies*) shows Walls interest in philosophical theology and deals with the question of dualism, physicalism, and a person's identity after death, i.e., the identity of a person between his/her life on earth, in the intermediate state, and at the resurrection. Purgatory, according to Walls, is a way to preserve the identity of a person.

Chapter six (*Wiping away every tear*) tackles the issue of the memory of the experience of evil in heaven. Are not many evils so grievous that they cannot be forgiven (p. 142)? Walls argues that 'the good of intimacy with God is "incommensurate" with any finite goods or evils' (p. 148). He argues that grace can be extended to perpetrators of grievous evil without it becoming cheap grace. This is because it was purchased at infinite cost, but also because

forgiveness is conditional – repentance is needed. Moreover, forgiveness is only the beginning of the saving relationship with God, resulting in holiness. Here again, the doctrine of purgatory strengthens his case.

The seventh chapter (*Ultimate motivation: heaven, hell, and the ground of morality*) argues that Christian theology, and the doctrine of heaven in particular, makes better sense of morality than does naturalism and offers a way out of the conflict between egoism and altruism. ‘Ultimate moral motivation comes from being loved by the ultimate lover, wanting to return that love, and thereby experiencing the ultimate joy a human being can know’ (p. 185).

In the final chapter (*His mercy endures forever – even beyond the grave?*) Walls contrasts minimal grace (God is offering just enough grace to justify condemnation) with optimal grace: God has a sincere desire to save, and therefore does ‘all he can to save all persons short of overriding their freedom’ (p. 200). This chapter discloses Walls speculative theology on purgatory as a way to maintain the necessity of Christ for salvation with the opportunity for salvation for all people – even those who have never heard the gospel in their lifetime. Walls distinguishes his position clearly from the minimal grace of Calvinism, but also from universalism.

It seems that Walls’ position on purgatory resembles that of Gavin D’Costa (*Christianity and the World Religions*, Blackwell, 2009) but differs on some important points. For D’Costa, purgatory is also a ‘place’ for people who have never truly heard the gospel but who

were nevertheless in an ontological relation with Christ. Purgatory provides them the possibility to enter into an epistemological relation with him and prepare them for the beatific vision. If I understand Walls correctly, he suggests that the context of some people, independent of their choices, is so degenerated — that they have not been in a context to develop a healthy moral sense. Hence, it seems that they were unable to enter in an ontological relation with Christ. Purgatory would then offer them an honest chance to enter into an ontological (and also epistemological) relation with Christ. These people do not get a ‘second chance’, but a first, real, opportunity to salvation. However, this scheme also implies that people in purgatory have the possibility to forego this real chance. This questions the traditional understanding of purgatory as a place reserved for people who die in a state of grace. If this deduction is indeed correct, it seems that Walls’ proposal will have a hard time acquiring ecumenical approval.

Walls’ book is a brave proposal that is well argued and cleverly communicated. It deserves a wide readership across denominational divides.

Wouter Biesbrouck  
KU Leuven